

Experiences of racism linked to adult-onset asthma in African-American women

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According to a new study from the Slone Epidemiology Center (SEC) at Boston University, African-American women who reported more frequent experiences of racism had a greater likelihood of adult-onset asthma compared to women who reported less frequent experiences.

The study, which currently appears on-line in the journal *Chest*, was led by Patricia Coogan, DSc, senior [epidemiologist](#) at SEC and research professor of epidemiology at Boston University School of Public Health.

This study followed 38,142 African-American [women](#), all of whom are participants in the Black Women's Health Study (BWHS), between 1997 and 2011. They completed health questionnaires every two years. In 1997 and 2009 they provided information on their [experiences](#) of "everyday" [racism](#), like poor service in stores or restaurants, and "lifetime" racism, which was discrimination encountered on the job, in housing and by police.

The results indicate that as experiences of everyday and lifetime racism increased, the incidence of adult-onset asthma also rose, up to a 45 percent increase in women in the highest compared to the lowest category of the racism measures. Furthermore, the incidence of asthma was increased even more in women who were in the highest category of everyday racism in both 1997 and 2009, and who may have had more consistent experiences of racism over time.

"This is the first prospective study to show an association between experiences of racism and adult-onset asthma," said Coogan. "Racism is a significant [stressor](#) in the lives of African American women, and our results contribute to a growing body of evidence indicating that experiences of racism can have adverse effects on health." The hypothesized mechanism linking experiences of racism to asthma incidence is stress and its physiological consequences, particularly effects on

the immune system and the airways. "Given the high prevalence of both [asthma](#) and of experiences of racism in African Americans, the association is of public health importance," she added.

BWHS is the largest follow-up study of the health of African American women in the United States. Led by researchers at the Slone Epidemiology Center, the BWHS has followed 59,000 African-American women through biennial questionnaires since 1995 and has led to a better understanding of numerous health conditions that disproportionately affect African-American women.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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